Classic Kidvid Revisited

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SEPTEMBER 1984

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Kurosawa
Japan's Greatest Director

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Panasonic Color Camera
Sansui Digital Audio Processor
Video Vision's LaserDisc Controller

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September 1984

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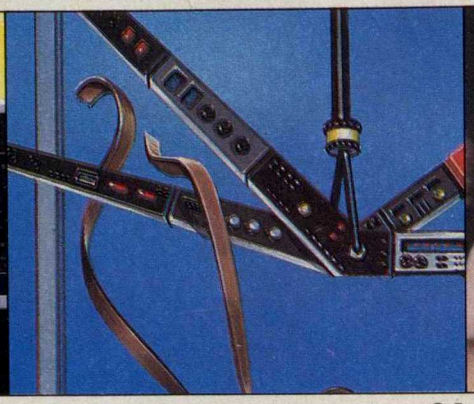

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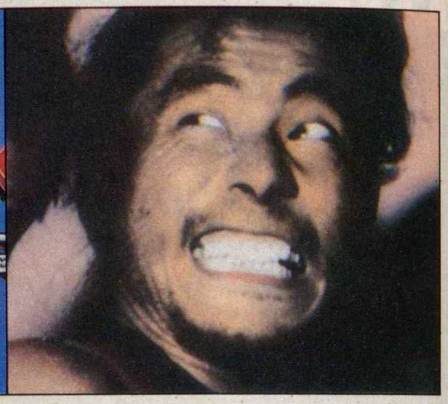

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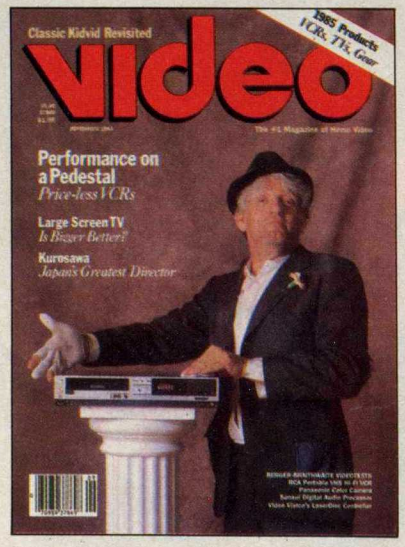

About the Cover. This month, the bottom line on bottom-of-the-line VCRs. Photo by Tom Weihs; VCR courtesy of E. 33 Typewriter & Electronics, N.Y.C.

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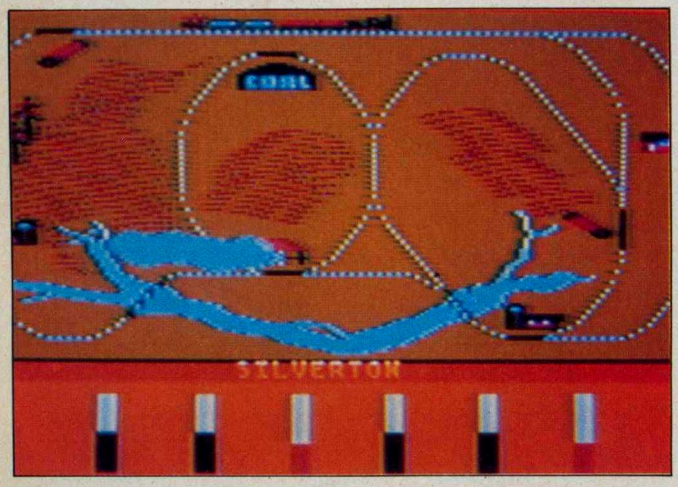
Computer Ease

The Human Interface

Cybernetic Choo-Choo

by Ivan Berger

Remember electric trains? The fun of running them forward and back, loading and unloading imaginary freight and blowing the whistle? Well, your kids probably don't. Today's electric trains are for the serious hobbyist, while the average kid is probably into computers—and who has the space and budget for both high-tech hobbies?



The landscape of Spinnaker's 'Trains'—'a lesson in how business works.'

But now, you and the kids can have your model railroad on your computer screen—and learn things my old Lionels never taught me—with a Spinnaker Software program called *Trains*. It runs on the IBM PC, Apple, Atari, and Commodore 64. It requires one disk drive and one joystick.

Trains is more than just a matter of running your choo-choo 'round the track. It's an economic simulation of railroading. You start with four empty freight cars, a $1000 bankroll, a full load of coal, and a territory containing customers with freight to send and other customers who need it. The screen shows your cash on hand, your train's speed (0-60 mph forward, 0-6 in reverse, in 3-mph increments), a bar-graph fuel gauge for your coal supply, a map of your territory, and how full or empty each car is. Press the space bar and the screen shows the availability of raw material at supplier and customer sites; press "L" and a legend screen shows which symbols stand for which types of freight car (ore, flat, box, oil), supplier (mine, lumber, farm, well), and customer (factory, lumbermill, market, refinery).

The object is to make money by efficiently keeping everyone on your route happy. You must plan your route and speed to pick up raw materials (especially from suppliers having surpluses of them) and deliver them to the customers who need them (especially to those who are running short).

It's not as simple as it sounds. Your train burns coal. Every so often you must stop at your coal depot to pick up more, and you must have enough money to cover it. If you run out before you reach the depot, you'll get an emergency coal supply—at higher cost. The faster you go and the more heavily laden, the more coal you burn (and the harder it is to stop your freight cars where they're needed). You must meet regular $200 payrolls (a sum matching the time of the puffer-belly on the screen), and pay $200 if you crash into a dead end.

You earn money as well as burn it. For every pickup and delivery your bankroll grows. The program gives you market-update messages such as "Market Needs Produce" or, if you're late making deliveries, "Work Stoppage at Mill." Faster deliveries earn you more money but burn more coal.

There are eight levels of play. Do well enough at any level and an on-screen message tells you to advance one level using a "siding" which leads off the screen. (If you cheat and take the siding prematurely, it leads you back one level.) *Trains* uses four basic track layouts, set in the desert, mountains, plains, and city; after Level 4, the sequence repeats.

The business of railroading grows more complex with each new level. In Level 1 you only have two oil wells and two refineries to deal with, and four oil cars to handle their needs. In Level 8 you have one freight car of each type, with suppliers and customers for what each will carry—and the pace quickens.

As your train becomes more complex, you must maneuver it more precisely. It does no good to edge a box car up to an oil well for a fillup, or to try unloading ore at the lumber mill. If you try, the train just whistles.

The simple choo-choo turns out to be a lesson in how business works. A simulation like this is one of the things computers do best. V

Ivan Berger is technical editor of Audio Magazine.